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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2943

INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 8682

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0705

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 5933

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 4580

RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1668

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 5219

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEAAIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001392

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM TH BM

SUBJECT: LEADING DEMOCRAT LEGISLATOR COMMENTS ON THAI
POLITICAL STABILITY

REF: A. BANGKOK 1380 (SURAKIART ON SOCIAL CONFLICT)

1B. BANGKOK 1370 (BURMESE PM VISIT)

1C. BANGKOK 1290 (DINNER WITH THAKSIN)

1D. STATE 45471 (FLAWED REFERENDUM)

BANGKOK 00001392 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Leading Democrat Party legislator Sukhumbhand Paribatra told us on May 7 that current media speculation about a possible coup d'etat evoked earlier rumors that former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra might orchestrate a seizure of power to undo the effects of the 2006 coup. Sukhumbhand assessed that possibility as "far-fetched" but said the military could conceivably intervene if demonstrations relating to constitutional amendment processes were to turn violent. We conveyed our strong opposition to a coup and will continue making that point with other contacts in coming days. Sukhumbhand believed the relationship between Thaksin and Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej was poor; he also discussed other political actors providing a check on Thaksin's influence while conceding his own party was largely ineffective. Sukhumbhand said that if a new election were held in the coming months, the People's Power Party (PPP) would win a majority in the House. Sukhumbhand also discussed the Democrats' shadow cabinet, the disposition of 2006 coup leader Sonthi Boonyaratglin, and his pessimism about Thai policy toward Burma. End Summary.

PRO-THAKSIN COUP "FAR-FETCHED"...

12. (C) Deputy Polcouns called on Democrat Party (DP) legislator Sukhumbhand Paribatra on May 7. Referring to media speculation about a possible coup d'etat, we asked whether Sukhumbhand was hearing private concerns about a possible military move to seize power. Sukhumbhand said that when Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej publicly mentioned in March that a coup d'etat could take place against him, members of the political class were speculating about a coup engineered by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. According to the rumored scenario, Thaksin would orchestrate

a coup in order to undo everything that the 2006 coup leaders had done, e.g., restore the 1997 Constitution, reverse the Constitutional Tribunal ruling that dissolved the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), and end pending legal cases against Thaksin and his family. Sukhumbhand believed that Thaksin was currently impatient with Samak and angry that Samak's administration had not quashed the legal cases against Thaksin. Nevertheless, Sukhumbhand said that he considered the scenario of a Thaksin-engineered coup "far-fetched." We said we hoped no coup would take place and explained the highly negative consequences for the U.S.-Thai relationship in the event of a military seizure of power.

... BUT ALL BETS OFF IN CASE OF STREET VIOLENCE

13. (C) Sukhumbhand said the military appeared to have learned from the 2006 coup and its aftermath that soldiers had neither the legitimacy nor the capability to govern Thailand. He did not believe that the military leadership was inclined to launch another coup. However, he said the military might intervene in the event of violent conflict in the streets. Sukhumbhand cautioned that he anticipated significant tension in the coming weeks, as debate over potential constitutional amendment proceeds; demonstrations and counter-demonstrations were likely. He added that many Thai fortune tellers anticipated violence, and fortune tellers' prophecies could often be self-fulfilling.

DEMOCRATS' VIEW ON THE CONSTITUTION

14. (C) The DP had not finalized its policy on constitutional amendment, Sukhumbhand said. A few points of consensus

BANGKOK 00001392 002.2 OF 003

within the party included:

- The current constitution should be amended;
- The amendment process should include popular participation;
- Amendment should not be driven by the self-interest of any party; and
- There should be a delay in implementing any provision that could be seen as affecting the self-interest of any party.

CHECKING THAKSIN'S INFLUENCE

15. (C) Sukhumbhand said pessimistically that the DP was currently incapable of providing an effective check on Thaksin and his loyalists (i.e., the bulk of the People's Power Party -- PPP). Other key actors currently offsetting Thaksin included:

- The People's Alliance for Democracy -- the group that led anti-Thaksin protests in 2005-2006, and currently the most vocal opponent of constitutional amendment;
- PM Samak. As noted above, Sukhumbhand believed there was friction between Samak and Thaksin. (Ref C provides Thaksin's perspective on this question, as related to the Ambassador.) Sukhumbhand viewed Samak as a fairly isolated "Lone Ranger" whose interests did not necessarily align with Thaksin's, but who could not be dismissed lightly, because of his authority to dissolve parliament and the powers that he held under the Internal Security Act; and
- Army Commander Anupong Paojinda. Sukhumbhand remarked that Anupong was currently positioned to be courted for support by both Samak and Thaksin, and he praised Anupong's ability to maneuver in such a way that no one in the political class thought ill of him.

NEW ELECTION?

16. (C) Sukhumbhand said the DP would be unprepared for an election in the near future. "Our coffers are empty," he admitted. He projected pessimistically that if an election were to take place under the 1997 (single-member district) system, the DP's presence in the House would shrink significantly. Sukhumbhand estimated that, in the event of a new election, a pro-Thaksin party would win an absolute majority of at least 300 seats; most other political parties created in the wake of Thai Rak Thai's dissolution either would be unable to find financing or would be absorbed into PPP or any new party might take PPP's place as the pro-Thaksin successor to TRT. He said the best situation for the DP would be for Samak to remain in office for a couple of years, allowing the party time to prepare for elections, but Sukhumbhand doubted Samak's administration would last that long. He foresaw a new election taking place either immediately after a constitutional amendment process, or earlier, if political pressure on Samak were to lead him to dissolve the House.

SONTHI: WHERE IS HE NOW?

17. (C) We remarked that the National Legislative Assembly (created by the 2006 coup leaders) seemed to have blundered in passing the Internal Security Act just prior to the 2007 election. Sukhumbhand said most of the blame for that legislative push fell on 2006 coup leader Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who miscalculated the election outcome. Up until the last moment, Sukhumbhand related, Sonthi believed he would be able to forge a governing coalition consisting of all parties except for PPP and backing Sonthi's selection as Prime Minister: Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana Party Leader Chettha Thanacharo, a former Army Commander.

BANGKOK 00001392 003.2 OF 003

18. (C) We asked whether Sonthi remained active in political circles. Sukhumbhand said he thought not; he believed Sonthi had reached an agreement of sorts with Thaksin -- "no war, no peace." Sukhumbhand also guessed that Sonthi was currently "enjoying his wealth," saying he believed Sonthi had become significantly wealthier after the coup.

DP SHADOW CABINET

19. (C) We asked Sukhumbhand's assessment of the DP's shadow cabinet. (The shadow cabinet, formed in early 2008, is a new innovation for Thailand; Sukhumbhand is the DP's shadow Foreign Minister.) Sukhumbhand said that it was too early to assess the shadow cabinet's efficacy. The shadow cabinet met each week on Thursday mornings; it had not yet been able to garner significant media attention for its positions. Sukhumbhand lamented that the DP lacked the staff and data to support the work of the shadow ministers.

BURMA

110. (C) Drawing on ref D, we explained the USG perspective on Burma's constitutional referendum. Sukhumbhand said he had been dismayed by what he perceived as the current Thai administration's overly accommodative stance toward Burma. He expected Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama to take an approach similar to that which prevailed during Thaksin's administration. Samak's recent statements (ref B) were also cause for concern, Sukhumbhand said. Samak added that the MFA bureaucracy would not push for reform in Burma. He assessed MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrakul as "sympathetic" toward Burma. Sukhumbhand related that when he (Sukhumbhand) became Deputy Foreign Minister in 1997, Virasakdi was Director General for Asian Affairs; at that

time, Virasakdi privately echoed the Burmese regime's position that the 1990 election in Burma was meant only to elect members of a constitution drafting assembly, even though most governments believed the elected candidates had won seats in a fully-empowered legislature.

COMMENT

11. (C) There has been a notable increase in the amount of public speculation about a possible coup d'etat, although we think such a development unlikely. Sukhumbhand is a credible interlocutor, and we found his perspective on the matter to be relatively balanced, as he neither ruled out the possibility nor saw it as likely. We will contact numerous interlocutors in coming days to continue sounding out views on this issue and express strong USG opposition to any prospective extraconstitutional seizure of power.

JOHN